FINDING AND RECOMMENDATION(S)

Submitted by Garry Bowen
Charter Member, International Society of Sustainability Professionals

Principal Author, Northern Nevada Sustainable Design Assessment Team Project

AIA Center for Communities by Design

Finding:

Solutions will be found in policies that are "equal to the scenery"

"Community and the Politics of Place", Daniel Kemmis, 1990

The 'built environment' in fire-prone areas such as Tahoe and elsewhere would be best to be rebuilt in ways that will not contribute to significant societal downsides in the future. As the suggested Multi-Jurisdictional 10 Year Plan states as number 1 of three components in their Executive Summary, "buildings and homes in the Basin should be built of fire-resistant materials and have effective defensible space. This submission notes that while there has been more than 10 years of advocating defensible space, there is very little emphasis on the newer findings related to ember and fire resistant design elements and materials.

As the 3 party open letter (including the Sierra Club, the League to Save Lake Tahoe, and the Sierra Forest Legacy) notes, "the largest fire threat in communities is a lack of defensible space and the susceptibility of homes to ember ignitions". Indeed, in a Forecast Earth segment from the Weather Channel looking at issues in the aftermath of the Hayman Fire of 2002 in the Colorado Rockies (157,000 acres), one homeowner was recorded as saying that it "all comes down to a single ember"

If there was ever validity to 'regulations' it would be to protect not only the community, but its' fiduciary and financial responsibilities in making sure that newer design elements are included. Municipalities will find themselves in ever more precarious indemnification situations when insurance companies will protect their risk by elevating the parameters of coverage to include

better “built environments” in their calculations, thereby rating some communities lower should they be lax in any aspect of management.

From a community architectural and planning standpoint, we humans now spend about 90% of our time in and around built structures - (if we’re not in one, we’re in another) – so these thoughts should be “across the board”. In mountain/urban areas, like Lake Tahoe and the hills above Los Angeles, Dr. Greg McPherson of the Western Center for Urban Forest Research (a Forest Service Research station at UC Davis) notes, “we have been for decades living in “pictures”, without any awareness that we are part of an entire ecosystem” – which for obvious reasons has to be emphasized as many times as necessary to get conformance to safer buildings.

The greatly expanded current emphasis on green and/or alyetnative bulding methods holds great promise, as it reduces as well the demands on the ecosystem in ordinary times, but can alter the equations, for example, concerning available water and pressure to fight fires when necessary. It will not be sufficient to rely on things like the recent change in California’s building codes, even if International Building codes emphasize fire more than in the past, as culturally, the building community recognized, implicitly or otherwise, that to build to code is, for the most part, to be legal is to be one step away from “illegal”. This recognizes, though perhaps facetiously, that the norm is to cut corners and costs wherever possible to be “competitive”. Another building concept to look at is the size of the building, as homes have doubled in size since 1960, not out of necessity, but out of vanity. It would be better to encourage a more safe and efficient building than allow a bigger one that is “status quo”, as the standards in the community learn what they need to build safer.

Background and Supporting Evidence:

The recent and continuing upsurge in the green building arena by both building material manufacturers, and, to a still lesser degree, the design community, mean that there are still significant numbers of the construction industry that will be “competitive” by working around holistic and energy-efficient designs, which will give short-shrift to the ideas inherent in green design, that of creating healthier environments for the inhabitants. This will require more diligence and regulation until the norms inevitably change.

Recommendation: Every consideration should be taken to create and continue incentive programs for affected professional to learn how to effectuate ember and fire resistant design and materials into projects in fire-prone areas, as they jeopardize to a higher degree the resources that are needed, not only in the "urban interface", but, in longer view, those that rely on resources 'downstream'.

The cost of treatment to accomplish what's necessary to maintain quality 'downstream' is too high to any more indulge those uncaring in the upstream or upscale areas. Budgets will be disproportionately affected without better recognition, in Dr. McPherson's view, by those who want to live in "picture postcards", without any sense of the consequences, either now or later.

This would begin the necessary process of prevention – by design. Design is known to have effects on conflict resolution, but in its' better manifestation, that of good design, it is less recognized – because there will not be the causation of further societal trauma.

Impacts of Implementation:

Analysis of impacts on the following factors is REQUIRED (Best Estimate):

- ☐ Cost — minimal
- ☐ Funding source — same
- ☐ Staffing — additional training
- ☐ Existing regulations and/or laws — change for the better

Analysis of impacts on the following factors:

- ☐ Operational
- ☐ Social
- ☐ Political — Overall, a better society without undue expense or use of resource
- ☐ Policy
- ☐ Health and Safety
- ☐ Environmental
- ☐ Interagency

Thanks again for the opportunity to contribute to this most important work